



Rocky Mountain News

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/state/article/0,1299,DRMN_21_2727267,00.html

A small uprising in Rico

Town's six-pupil school finds itself in the eye of a political hurricane

By James B. Meadow, Rocky Mountain News

March 13, 2004

RICO - In a little town you probably never heard of, where the streets have no signs, snowfall is as inescapable as oxygen, boarded-up storefronts outnumber the six operating businesses and political tension crackles, a passionate teacher who looks like Huckleberry Finn with a goatee is alternately encouraging, prodding and orchestrating an entire school of children all by himself.

True, enrollment is all of six students, but that hardly matters to "Mr. Andy."

Advertisement

That would be 32-year-old Andy Waterman who, four days a week, eight hours a day, earns his \$26,000 salary teaching reading, math, science and English - to say nothing of cross-country skiing, snow cave building and fly-fishing - to one sixth-grader, one fifth-grader, one third-grader, two first-graders and one kindergartner at the Rico Grade School.

And for this, he considers himself the luckiest teacher on the planet. At least most of the time.

As Waterman has discovered, he isn't just the lone teacher in Rico, referee of a small number of rambunctious kids and frequent operator of the school's snowblower. He's also a lightning rod.

Small as Rico is - the population of the southwestern Colorado town is hovering around 225 - political lines have been drawn around the school.

Suspicious and mistrustful of its fellow Dolores County cousins - the county seat is 80 miles away in Dove Creek - Rico attempted to secede last year from the Dolores County School District and join with Telluride, 30 miles over the mountains in San Miguel County.

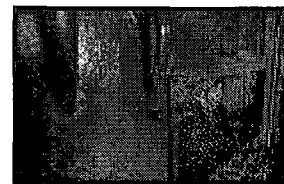
Even though Telluride voted to accept the tiny school and its six students, and Rico townfolk voted heavily in favor of making the change, the move was blocked by the vote elsewhere in Dolores County.

Now there is talk of wholesale secession - as in leaving Dolores County altogether - swirling through much of the town and a "Committee for Detachment" has been formed.

Yet there is an eye in the brewing hurricane. "There's so much one-on-one with the kids - that's what I love about this," says Waterman, on a recent snowy day, moving across a classroom that is a sprawling melange of books, pencils, *National Geographic* magazines, loose-leaf paper and computers.

Effortlessly, he executes a six-foot commute from the desk of sixth-grader Kaitlin Nunley ("What's the area of a parallelogram, Mr. Andy?" "C'mon, you know." "Mmm, base times height?") to the desk of first-grader Kaleb Queen ("Good work, Kaleb. Hmm, this problem has to be fixed. That one's good. Good, good").

Next, he hangs a right toward 10-year-old fifth-grader Rhapsody Rhines ("What's the answer to No. 12?" "Six



Photos By Maria J. Avila © News

Above, first-grader Wyatt Jones, 6, one of six students at Rico Grade School, waits for his ride home at the end of the day earlier this month. The school reopened in August after the once-booming mining town of Rico went nearly 20 years without a school of its own. During that time, parents took their children to Telluride or Dolores to school.

and two-fifths." "Good." "Thirteen?" "\$20.13"), before heeding the plaintive cry of pencil-wagging 8-year-old third-grader Kelby Nunley ("Mr. Andy, I neeeeed help").

"This is what I like best - I can go right over to each of them when they need me," says Waterman, who spent the six years prior teaching larger classes on nearby American Indian reservations. It's amazing - I can do so much. I'm not just baby-sitting, I'm getting them on task. Here, it's about teaching."

How long he'll be able to teach, however, is another question.

The coolness of Mr. Andy

While the Rico Grade School's six-strong student body may not sound like much, it's six more than were here a year ago. Or five years.

In fact, before the modest building reopened its half-century-old doors in August, the town had been without its own school for nearly 20 years. Two decades of parents became accustomed to sending their kids 38 miles downriver to the town of Dolores in neighboring Montezuma County, or 30 miles over Lizard Head Pass, elevation 10,222, to Telluride in San Miguel County.

That's two decades of percolating resentment directed at a school district willing to swallow Rico's tax dollars without providing much in return. Two decades of new faces moving to town, bringing different ideas and ambitions.

Which is why you have real estate developer Keith Lindauer, who takes his 6-year-old-daughter to school in Telluride, referring to the local institution as a "podunk schoolhouse" and the Dolores County School District as "one of the worst in the state."

Conversely, you have Vanessa Rhines, who sends her 10-year-old, Rhapsody, to school in Rico, happily persuaded that "it's almost like *Little House on the Prairie* with a touch of Montessori."

While the reopening of the school under the aegis of the Dolores County School District may be a source of satisfaction, consternation and perhaps indifference to various residents, for Kaitlin Nunley, the issue is far less complex.

In a breathless soliloquy, the 12-year-old explains, "I like that we only have to walk 100 yards to school from our house and that's neat because I went to school in Dolores last year and the bus ride was sometimes two hours and that was awful because we had to get up at 6:15 and didn't get home 'til 4:30 and now I get up at 7, which is cool."

Oh, and "Mr. Andy is cool, too."

Ken Hazen agrees.

"I'm very satisfied with Andy," says Hazen, 77, grandfather to Kaitlin and Kelby (and first-grader Wyatt Jones). "And the kids love him, too. Not only does he teach them the basics, he's really into the outdoors, so they get outside a lot. Last fall, they were studying the environment, so they went to the river to learn about water. They got to take their fishing poles. Now, to me, that's a healthy environment."

As far as Hazen is concerned, not only is it a blessing for his grandkids to be able to walk to school and live close to him, but "when some people say the school can't compete academically, I don't believe that."

Waterman had trouble believing the frosty reception he received when he arrived in Rico.

"I was pretty naive at the beginning; I was so amp'd at being here," he recalls in a blissful moment of quiet after the kids have left for the day.

"When I first came here, a lot of the people against the school opening were very vocal," he says. "I didn't

feel welcome. I did not feel supported at all. There were articles in the newspaper (the *Rico Times*) that called the school 'a sham,' and that kind of hurt my feelings.

"But then school started, and I was just too into the teaching part to care what some people thought."

What some of those people thought - people such as Keith Lindauer - was nothing personal, Mr. Andy. But the education situation in Rico, they felt, had become "intolerable."

20-year hiatus ends

Maybe it all started before any of the protagonists in the drama were around, on Dec. 26, 1944, when the Dolores County seat was moved 80 miles west from Rico to Dove Creek. Although understandable in light of Rico's declining population and economy, it was still an indignity for the once-prosperous mining town (its name means rich in Spanish) that had been home to 5,000 in its heyday.

But things got worse in 1985. With townsfolk hovering at 200 - and students down to three - the four-room K-6 school was closed.

The town lumbered into hard times; businesses withered and died. Long before the millennium arrived, Rico had metamorphosed into a bedroom community of Telluride. Like Rico, Telluride had mining origins. Unlike Rico, it had become a humming, glitzy burg with a well-heeled school district.

For the growing number of Rico residents who worked in Telluride, it made sense to tote their children to school there. But the concern, as Lindauer explains, was, "As long as there's room in Telluride, they'll take our kids. But what if Telluride has capacity problems? What if there's no room for our kids? Where does that leave us?"

The option of sending their children to schools in the town of Dolores in neighboring Montezuma County held no appeal for those used to the superior academic climate in Telluride.

Even Dolores County Schools Superintendent Don Davis acknowledges, "I can feel empathy for the parents whose kids went to Telluride. If my kid was going to Telluride schools for four or five years, I would hate the possibility of having to relocate them to another school, too."

For some in Rico, the possibility of sending their children to a school in Rico run by the Dolores County district was equally unthinkable. And that's what seemed to be looming in 2000 when the district began making noises about reopening the school thanks to projections that indicated Rico was due for a student "boom."

By 2005, between 10 to 15 new students would be of school age, according to the projections, enough to justify resurrecting Rico's school. So, included on a countywide bond issue was a stipulation that up to \$300,000 would be earmarked for refurbishing the town's school. As Davis put it, "The board felt it had a moral obligation to open the building."

Others saw things differently.

The board's largesse, some felt, was only a bone to Rico, a ploy to get the bond issue passed. And the jewel in the bond's crown was \$5.5 million for a new high school in Dove Creek, a school nobody in Rico would ever use. Twice before, county voters had defeated similar measures. It seemed as if the district was just trolling for votes in Rico.

Davis denies this.

"Everybody knew that Rico wasn't going to carry the vote," he says, reiterating that the board's "moral and ethical obligation" to Rico was the true motivation.

Although the county approved the bond issue, in Rico the vote was 101-to-11 against. Few wanted to help subsidize the new high school in Dove Creek.

Secession debate heated

"It always seemed the Dolores (County) School District was not doing anything for this community. There was a feeling that Dove Creek doesn't understand us, that the farming community doesn't really represent us," says Eamonn O'Hara, who runs the Rico Hotel and Restaurant, which, along with a Conoco station, an embroidery store, a candle store and a liquor store is about all the commerce you'll find in town.

As the refurbishing work - new roof, new ceiling, new boiler, new carpeting, painting the cinderblock walls white - began on the school, some residents began charting a new course: secession from the Dolores County School District and a merger with Telluride's. Such a move was perfectly legal; it just needed approval in all the affected areas.

In the months preceding the vote, politicking commenced and a dark spectre loomed over the town.

"There was no middle ground," says O'Hara, whose daughter attends middle school in Dolores but wishes there had been a local school for her to attend when the girl was younger.

Says Town Manager Ashton Harrison: "During the election period, emotions on both sides were high. Let's put it this way: It was nasty."

According to Rico resident - and Dolores County school board member - Kim Jones, it was worse than nasty. "It got ugly around here. Mean, slandering things were written in our newspaper."

The spoken word also was invoked, as tempers flared and the dialogue at town meetings became heated. Outside of town meetings, however, things were more civil - but only because the different factions rarely spoke to one another.

The election took place in January a year ago. When the results were in, Telluride agreed to accept Rico into its school district by a 233-to-154 vote.

Rico residents agreed to move to Telluride's school district by better than 3-to-1 (76 to 22). But the rest of Dolores County said uh-uh, 261 to 60, which scuttled the move.

'Bean farmers' rule

To Lindauer, the election meant that "the decision about how we educate our kids is not ours; it's being made by a bunch of bean farmers in Dove Creek. There are bad, bad feelings. How would you feel if 85 (actually 77) percent of your community voted one way but lost? . . . That's intolerable!"

Aware that the electoral deck is always going to be stacked against them ("Dove Creek can kick our butt in any election," Lindauer says), those who want Rico to become part of Telluride's school district have come up with another plan: Have Rico secede from Dolores County altogether and become its own city and county. A Committee For Detachment is now researching ways to do that.

Although some locals, such as Hazen, call the movement, "One of the most stupid things anyone could do. We have no tax base here," Lindauer says the group has hope, even if it lacks local voting clout.

Although nothing is finalized, right now the most likely strategy is to try and submit the proposal to the state's electorate, attempting to have the Colorado Constitution amended in much the same way that Broomfield became a city and county several years ago.

Should the Committee for Detachment succeed, it seems likely that the first order of business for the new county would be to join the Telluride school district.

That, Lindauer says, is the only way the Rico Grade School will survive. The only way he - and like-minded parents - would ever send their children to the school is if "the Telluride R-1 School District was running it."

And until that happens, "We'll keep driving our kids over the pass."

Which doesn't bode well for the continued existence of the Rico school. In fact, the clock is already ticking.

'A financial hit'

"We're taking a financial hit keeping it open," Davis says. "But I think we needed to show people we're making a good-faith effort. You know, 'You're spending tax dollars, and we're going to give you something for your taxes.' "

As for the continued life of the school, Davis says, "We plan on keeping it open next year."

And after next year?

"That depends on how many kids are attending."

In other words, if 10 or 15 new students aren't in the fold by 2005, the school likely is doomed.

That is something Kim Jones fervently hopes against.

Jones, one of Hazen's two daughters, and the mother of Wyatt, insists her son is "excelling incredibly." Furthermore, "You see a lot parents today home-schooling their kids; some have private tutors. But Andy is such an incredible teacher that our school is like having all of that rolled into one."

She hopes other see that.

"Maybe parents who were so adamant about their kids going to Telluride will look at how well our kids are doing and say, 'Gee, maybe we should give it a try.' "

One thing's certain - Jones has no doubts about where she'd like to send her daughter Adeline, 2, when she's ready for school.

"Oh, I want her here in town."

Jones said she not only hopes the school is still there, she hopes Mr. Andy is, too.

So does Waterman. As Wyatt scampers past him to pick out a book and the three girls talk in very bad Jamaican accents while discussing *Pirates of the Caribbean* ("Best movie ever," insists Kelby), he looses a slight frown and says, "Sometimes I feel like some people are waiting for me to do something wrong." Then, after a sigh, he adds, "I just want to work in a small town."

A small school that some hope will be standing long after the political hurricane has passed.

meadowj@RockyMountain News.com or 303-892-2606

Copyright 2004, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.